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THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND THE WORKING CHILDREN¹

BY FLORENCE KELLEY,
Secretary of the National Consumers' League.

Never again can the problem of the working children in this Republic be regarded as merely a local one, when the textile industry stretches from Texas, Alabama and Georgia northward through all the Atlantic States to Pennsylvania, New York and New England; when the glass industry, to-night, while we are gathered here, is employing little boys in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Missouri; and in only two of those states—Ohio and Illinois—is there even a pretence that it is illegal to have children working all night. Surely the American people can never again honestly regard these industries, and the conditions attending labor in them, as matters of merely local moment. It is only necessary to state the situation to make clear how fatuous is the attempt to deal with the textile industries through the legislatures of a dozen different states; and with the glass industries through the legislatures of a second dozen states.

These industries never consider themselves as local ones when they come to Congress and ask the nation to protect their interests. Then they appear as a unit, having identical reasons for their action, identical arguments in their own behalf.

When it is a question of the nation checking, even indirectly, their cruel robbery of the cradle, they urge that it is with West Virginia or with New Jersey that the friends of the children should deal, the state legislatures having been hitherto, on the whole, satisfactory to the employers.

¹ Address in the Symposium on the Evils of Child Labor, at the Second Session of the Annual Meeting, Washington, December 8, 1905.

Never again can it be a matter of merely local concern what hours the children are working. They will be the republic when we are dead, and we cannot leave it to the local legislators, here and there, to decide unobserved what sort of citizens shall be produced in this or that State, whether they shall be strong in body, mind and character, or whether they shall grow up enfeebled by overwork in early childhood.

In the past this great Republic has cared so little about its children that, though the census of 1900 reported half a million of them between the ages of ten and fourteen years who could neither read nor write—native children, not immigrants (the little black children in the cotton fields picking cotton, and the little white children in the cotton mills, spinning and helping to weave it)—when the census showed, five years ago, half a million of these children, what attention was given to the facts?

They were concealed in two obscure pages of the census of 1900, until, within a month, in November, 1905, there has come, five years belated, a bulletin giving particulars. The children who were ten years old in 1900 are fifteen years old now, and the children who were thirteen years old are many of them married now. And now we get those belated tidings!

As to the cotton crop, we Americans are so very eager! We have even been willing to corrupt the men who knew anything about it if they would but give us tidings a few hours ahead of the legal moment of publication. But for information about the children who work up the cotton crop, we can wait until they are grown up and married! We Americans care so little about the working children, who are citizens in the bud, who will be the Republic when we are dead!

For more than a generation we have had a so-called Department of Education. It has published information so inconclusive and so belated that it is the laughing stock of Europeans interested in our educational institutions; so belated, moreover, that it is worthless for our own uses in obtaining improved legislation in this country.

Meanwhile it is left to a feeble volunteer society to collect a few hundred dollars, here and there, and publish in January, every year, the new statutes which have taken effect in the twelve months next preceding. Why does not the Department of Education do

this? Why has not the Department of Labor always done this? Why have they not made it a joint undertaking? What are these departments for, if they are not to furnish to the people information concerning the working children at a time when it can be used?

So far as I have been able to learn by studying the reports of these two departments, the hieroglyphics on the pyramid of Cheops are not more remote from the life of to-day than their statistics are remote from the life of the working children of Georgia and Pennsylvania.

It is time to recognize that the children who will be the Republic have rights now. It is important that the American people should know under what conditions they are living, and working, and becoming invalids or criminals, thousands of them dying in childhood and early youth. Surely it is more important to know these things, that we may act upon the knowledge, than to be informed with furious haste by the associated press whenever another great department hopes that it has found some new variety of insect which may destroy the boll-weevil. Surely it is more important that the American people should know what is really happening to its young children in industry than that we should learn at brief intervals how the young lobsters are faring on the coast of Maine and the young trout in the remote streams of Northern Wisconsin.

At last, there is a proposal that we should rise from our low position among the nations when we are ranked according to our care of our children. We are not, when graded according to our care and education of our working children, in the same class of enlightened and humane nations as England, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Scandinavia. Rather, we rank with Russia, in the matter of our half million illiterate native children in this century, as we ranked with Russia in the matter of slavery and serfdom in the last century. Measured by our cruel neglect of our working children, it is undeniably with Russia that we stand to-day.

Those nations which have cared effectively for their working children have done so through their central governments, not, as we have vainly attempted, through fifty-two legislatures. It is now proposed that we should limp haltingly after those nations, though Congress may be by no means ready to legislate in a unified

way for the children as it does, for instance, for the textile industry, the glass industry and the interests of agriculture.

It is proposed that there should be devoted to the children one bureau of our government, by means of which the people should be able to obtain, from month to month, recent trustworthy information concerning everything that enters into the lives of the children; everything that makes for or against their vital efficiency, their educational opportunity, their future industrial and civic value.

A bill will be presented to Congress, with the hope that there may be established a bureau of research and publicity in the interests of all the children in the Republic.